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For those who treat Led Zeppelin as sacred scripture, the following lines from “Stairway to Heaven” have presumably been the subject of great inquiry:

*In my thoughts I have seen  
rings of smoke through the trees  
and the voices of those who stand looking*

How can one see voices, even in one’s thoughts?

Ibn Ezra notes that sensation is fundamentally a cognitive phenomenon, and essentially the wires from the various sense organs can be crossed. Synaesthesia can have many causes, including heredity, and is often prized by those who experience it. It is also a common side effect of hallucinogens, which may well exclaim the presence of rings of smoke in the paragraph.

Now the title of “Stairway to Heaven” is obviously a reference to Yaakov’s dream, and it seems reasonable therefore to look for Biblical allusions in the lyrics as well. Here the line “and the voices of those who stand looking” seems to me a clear play on Shemot 20:14

**וכל העם ראים את הקולת  
ואת הלפידים  
ואת קול השפר  
ואת ההר עשן  
וירא העם  
וינעו  
ויעמדו מרחק;**

All the nation were looking at the voices  
and the lightning bolts  
and the voice of the shofar  
and the mountain smoking;  
The nation looked  
and they trembled  
and they stood at a distance

Many, many beautiful interpretations - pace Ibn Ezra - have been offered for the phenomenon, experience, and/or metaphor here of visible voices. Targum Yonatan captures some of the opportunities as follows:

וכל עמא חמיין ית קלייא  
היך הוו מתהפכין בשמעהון דכל חד וחד  
והיך הוו נפקין מן גו בעוריא  
וית קל שופרא היך הוה מחי מיתיא  
וית טורא תנין  
And all the nation saw the voices  
how they were altering in the hearing of each individual  
and how they were emerging from the flames  
and how the voice of the shofar was resurrecting the dead  
and the mountain smoking

For Targum Yonatan the voices are made visible so that each Jew can hear the voice particular to him or herself, and at the same time see that their subjective experience does not capture the objective reality of Torah. Perhaps the collective transgenerational experience of Klal Yisroel can, and that is why it was necessary to resurrect the dead at Sinai. (Perhaps the song really means “the voices experienced by those who stand looking”; what would it have been like to stand at Sinai, see everyone else’s experience, and yet hear no Voice of one’s own?)

What becomes clear by contrast, however, is that Targum Yonatan leaves the smoke uninterpreted. The standard midrashic interpretation reads the smoke as an allusion to the Covenant between the Pieces in Genesis 15:17, and in both places as a stand-in for Gehennom (from which one can be saved by the fire of Torah). I find this deeply unsatisfying; fire causes smoke, rather than saving from it, albeit an image of Torah as gasmask might not be effectively inspirational. And why must a negative image, evne threat, be part of Ultimate Revelation?

Meshekh Chokhmah offers the best alternative I have thus far found, although even he cannot avoid a negative association. I suspect (although he says none of this explicitly) that he began with the conviction that the fire of the Burning Bush did not smoke; smoke is a side effect of fuel consumption. He then moved to the claim in Yoma that manna is angel food = לחם אבירים, and therefore produces no bodily waste to eliminate. Combining these tropes yields the realization that smoke is the product of an imperfectly efficient flame, which is neither self-sustaining nor non-polluting. Why would the flame of Sinai be imperfect?

Here is his daring answer in part:

וכל העם רואים את הקולות וכו' ואת ההר עשן וירא העם וינעו ויעמדו מרחוק.  
הביאור, דאמרו דבכל המסעות כתיב "ויסעו ויהנו" בלשון רבים - שנסעו במחלוקת, עד שבאו לסיני ונעשו הגמוניה אחת שלא היו במחלוקת.

אמר: הרי השעה שאתן תורה לבני!

אמנם, כי אם לא היה להם מחלוקת, בכל זאת היה בהם ניצוץ קנאה אחד בחבירו, שלא הגיעו עוד לאהוב חבירו כנפשו ולשמוח במעלת חבירו.

ועל זה אמרו במכילתא (יתרו פרשה יט, כ) אף כשעמדו בסיני נאמר עליהם (תהלים עח, לו) "ויפתוהו בפיהם ולבם לא נכון עמו", שהיה הלב לא מטוהר מקנאה.

והנה אמרו כי משה שקול ככל ישראל, אבל כן היו כל ישראל שקולים כמשה (מכילתא בשלח טו, א). ואם כן, אם היה בלא שום קנאה ושום פירוד לבבות זה מזה, רק כל העדה כולם קשורים בלב ונפש אחד, הלא היו כולם איש אחד, והיו ראויים לקבל כל התורה כמשה. אבל כיון שלא היו קשורים בלבב אחד, אם כן כל אחד בפרט לא הגיע לשלימות כזה לקבל התורה. ומה שראו ושמעו בדברות היה כדי לאמת האמונה בלבם, וכמו הוראת שעה.

The explanation is that in all their travels Scripture writes "And *they* travelled and *they* camped", because they travelled in מחלוקת=controversy, until they came to Sinai and became one bloc with no controversy.

G-d said: Behold the time that I will give Torah to My sons!

However, even though they had no controversy, there was yet among them a spark of interpersonal jealousy, as they had not yet reached the level of loving their friend as themselves and celebrating the greater achievement of a friend.

About this Mekhilta (the halakhic midrash on Exodus) writes that "Even while they stood at Sinai Scripture (Psalms 68:36) says of them "They seduced Him with their lips, but their hearts were not prepared to be with Him", because their hearts were not purified of jealousy.

Now the Rabbis said that Mosheh was equivalent to all Israel, but likewise all Israel are equal to Mosheh, and if so, had their been no jealousy or division of hearts among them, rather all the congregation bound together as one heart and spirit, they would all have been one person, and they would have been fit to receive the whole Torah, just like Mosheh. But since they were not bound together as one heart, each individual did not reach the level of perfection necessary for receiving the Torah, so that what they saw and heard at the Statement was only to verify faith in their hearts, and it was like a הוראת שעה=temporary suspension of the Law . . .

Among the beauties of Meshekh Chokhmah's reading is that he notes the irony of having smoke obscure the astounding visual experience of voices. Perhaps he believes that in a perfect world each of us, like Mosheh Rabbeinu, would have heard all voices simultaneously – *zakhor* and *shamor* in one Statement – and Hashem resorted to synesthesia only because of our limitations. It is quite astonishing to claim that the Law was given in the equivalent of a (justified and necessary) breach of the Law!

Meshekh Chokhmah of course also beautifully captures the Rabbinic idea that all future interpretations of Torah were already revealed to Mosheh. But this Rabbinic notion has an underappreciated consequence – it means that Mosheh Rabbeinu, uniquely among all Jews, was never able to experience himself as contributing creatively to Torah. Perhaps G-d gave us the Torah just *before* we reached perfect concord to ensure that we would still have the capacity to be partners in the creation of Torah just as we are in the creation of the physical world, and perhaps this is why the Sages often praise the mutual jealousy of scholars when it is harnessed to productive Torah ends.

Shabbat shalom!